

THE HISTORY OF BRAILLE.

Martha Meserole Brian

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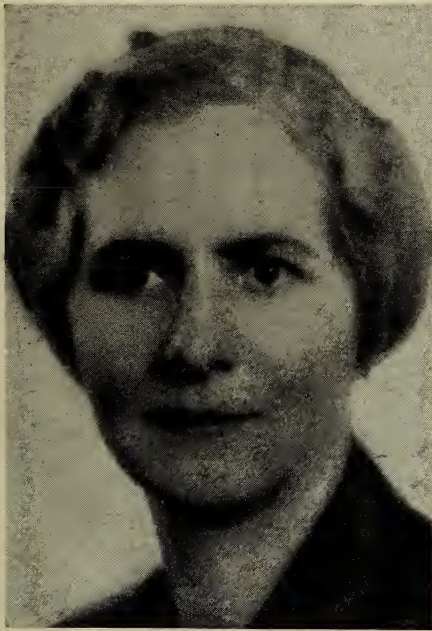
# Fraternity Project



## The History of Braille

Martha Meserole Brian, *Alpha Sigma*

✚ I MUST tell you about a most interesting experience I've just had. I visited the American Brotherhood for the Blind in Pasadena and told them what I was writing for THE ANCHOR. I was most graciously received, and the manager took me through the entire plant. I saw the stereotype ma-



✚ DOROTHY PETERSON FULLER, *Gamma*  
*Chairman of Braille*

chine making Braille plates, and watched the big press printing Braille pages from these plates. Then, I helped put some pages together to make a Braille book. After that, I watched a blind worker wrapping books for mailing followed by a lesson in writing Braille with slate and stylus. And so all I've learned of the history of Braille has

culminated in this first-hand experience which has impressed upon me, more than all the research I've done, the value of this wonderful method by which the blind read and write.

Now, I am going to take you way back to 1784. Apparently up to this time, the idea of the universal education of the blind had occurred to no one. But about this time a noted French philanthropist, Valentine Haüy, became interested in their condition and wished to teach them to read and write so that they could find employment. Quite by accident, he discovered the principle of embossed printing. This was merely a raised alphabet which the blind could feel with their finger tips. The thought behind the system being to keep it as much in accord with the methods used for teaching normal children as possible.

While this system was the greatest single step in the improvement of the condition of the blind, the trouble was that he assumed that touch became a substitute for sight and that what appealed to the eye would appeal equally to the finger tips. No advance over Haüy's system of embossed printing was made until 1815. About this time another Frenchman, Charles Barbier, invented a system of point writing and the writing frame, now called slate and stylus, to be used as a cipher for military intelligence service. Barbier used a complicated system of twelve dots to represent his cipher. This method was finally perfected and introduced in the National Institute for the Blind in Paris.

Here a brilliant young blind man became acquainted with it. This man was Louis Braille. An accident in his early childhood



## Beekman Tower Notes

✧ WITH the coöperation of outstanding leaders in our national life, the Panhellenic groups in New York City, as member units in the Fraternity Women's Committee for the New York World's Fair, are sponsoring an essay contest in 846 colleges and universities of the country in an effort to focus attention on some of the basic principles of our democracy, according to Miss Sophie P. Woodman, Pi Beta Phi, chairman of the Fraternity Women's Committee, which has its headquarters at the Beekman Tower Hotel, 3 Mitchell Place, New York.

According to Miss Woodman, the committee is devoting its current annual contest to a consideration of the so-called "four freedoms" contained in the First Article of the Bill of Rights, as one of its official activities as a member group of the Advisory Committee for Women's Participation for the New York World's Fair of 1939. This subject matter is one of the basic themes of the New York World's Fair of 1939, which is stressing both in its program and in concrete form at the Fair Grounds, these so-called "four freedoms"—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom of the press, and freedom of peaceable assembly.

In conjunction with its essay contest, the Fraternity Women's Committee expects to hold a panel discussion on "the four freedoms" sometime this spring, at its headquarters at the Beekman Tower. The New York committee also is planning to serve as a hostess group for visiting fraternity women during the period of the New York World's Fair.

Governmental leaders who have supplied topics for the contest are: Genreal John J. Pershing; Sumner Welles, Under-Secretary of State; and Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, of New York City.

Outstanding educators, contributing questions, are: Dr. James Rowland Angell, former President of Yale University and Educational Counselor of the National

Broadcasting Company; Dr. Virginia C. Gildersleeve, Dean of Barnard College; Dr. Hans Kohn, Professor of History at Smith College; Dr. Stringfellow Barr, President of St. John's College, Annapolis; and Herbert Wright, Head of Department of Politics at Catholic University of America.

Well known journalists, who are also participating, are Hans Kaltenborn, News Commentator, Columbia Broadcasting System; Arthur Krock, Political Writer, *New York Times*; and Dorothy Thompson, Columnist, *New York Herald-Tribune*.

Mrs. Vincent Astor, chairman of the Advisory Committee for Women's Participation for the New York World's Fair, Mrs. A. Barton Hepburn, President of the Panhellenic House Association, and William Church Osborne, the noted attorney who is chairman of the Temple of Religion for the New York World's Fair, also contributed questions.

A trip to the World's Fair, with a one  
(Continued on page 421)

☛ "REVERIE," red terra cotta sculpture, by HELEN FOWLER CANPHER, Alpha Eta, has been selected from an exhibition of Louisiana artists for exhibition at the New York World's Fair.



had caused blindness, and he had entered the Institute when he was ten years old. He became a distinguished organist and violin-cellist. Music was the primary interest of his life. It was because of this, no doubt, that he happened to adapt Barbier's point system for musical notation and so made a musical alphabet. He found his fingers could not readily distinguish the twelve points at one time, so he condensed them to six (like the blank—six in dominoes) and worked out an alphabet, having the dots or points in various combinations represent letters, punctuation marks, and figures. In all, he made sixty-three combinations. This kept the written work of the blind correct in spelling and punctuation. In other words, in pure alphabetical form. Thus was born the Braille System which with modifications is still in use today.

This is the fundamental Braille cell: ::

Of course, as is the case with so many great men, his work was not officially recognized until after his death. But the value of his system is in the fact that the state of the blind was lifted from one of beggary and charity to a place of respect and usefulness in the community. *All this has been brought about by mass education, and Braille is the instrument by which mass education was given to the blind.*

Braille was invented in 1829, just a little over a hundred years ago, but still the struggle went on by the zealous to make the blind read and write by the utterly unfit means of raised print. System after system was tried and discarded. Two, however, must be mentioned because they met with much favor. The first, developed by Samuel Gridley Howe, noted philanthropist and founder of the Perkins Institution and the Massachusetts School for the Blind, was called the "Boston Line Letter." The other was invented by an Englishman, William Moon. He had become blind when he was twenty-one and had worked out a system which could be easily read by those becoming blind at an advanced age. It is a kind of raised alphabet remotely resembling the Roman but looks for all the world like hiero-

glyphics found in prehistoric caves. Nevertheless, the elderly blind still use this Moon type although it is gradually dying out because a new generation is learning the standard Braille of today.

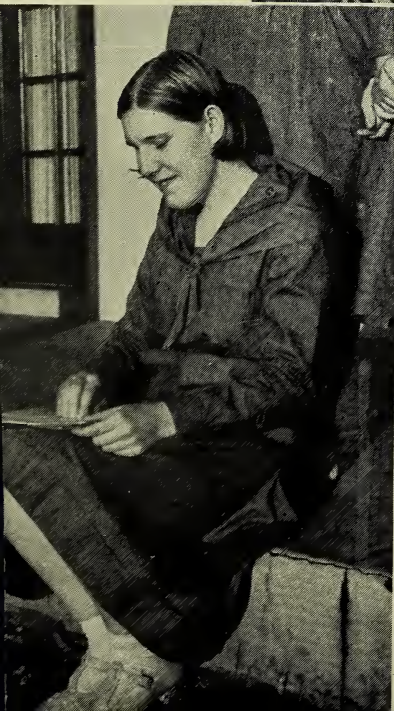
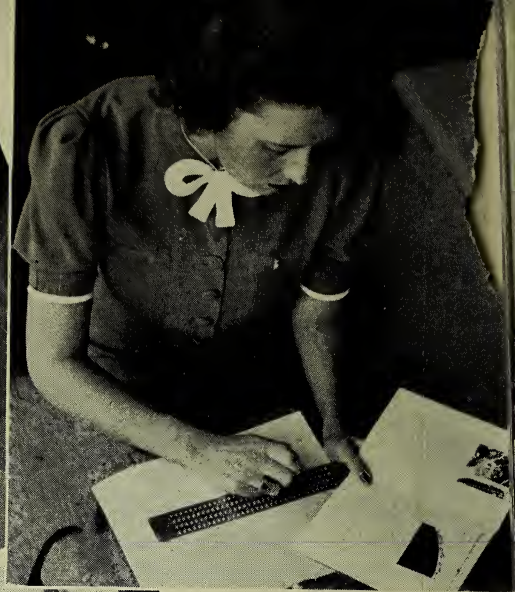
In the meantime, the Braille system had been formally adopted in Paris in 1854 and was gradually spreading to all parts of the world. It was introduced in England in 1868 and in America about 1860 at the Missouri School for the Blind in St. Louis. The "confusion of types" or line systems continued to obscure the superiority of the Braille system. Of course, the reasonable explanation was that no one had thought to analyze the reading processes of the blind from a psychological aspect. No one thought to ask the blind themselves to decide the issue. While all through the years, they continued to be grateful for anything that was done for them, the great mass of blind could not master line type and so continued to be non-readers, except those who had had Braille brought to them. Finally, when the "seeing" thought of the idea that the blind should determine for themselves which system best suited them, did Braille definitely prove superior to the other systems.

### Another Point System

No sooner was this more or less settled, than another point system came into being, invented by William Wait. This system had four dots and was supposed to be simpler. At least, Mr. Wait very definitely thought so. For now occurred the "battle of the points." There were three systems involved—the American Braille, a slightly revised original system of six points; the New York point, Mr. Wait's system of four points; and the British Braille, a six point system which had been the basis of American Braille.

Finally, in 1892 Frank Hall made a wonderful invention, a typewriter for American Braille point. This definitely established the superiority of the Braille system over the New York point and opened a whole new world for the blind. Soon the stereoplate maker for impressing Braille characters into







metal sheets was invented. *The problem of writing and of producing relatively cheap literature for the blind had been solved.*

Soon after this, all authorities realized there must be a standard system adopted. The American Association of Workers for the Blind appointed a "Uniform Type Committee" which made a notable report in 1907 and recommended further investigation. This committee continued its work over a period of years. So by *experimentation with the aid of the blind* was brought about what is today called revised Braille, and the unity of all English speaking countries in the matter of tactile print for the blind came close to realization."

The revised Braille has four grades. Grade 1 is a simple alphabet plus a few of the most common word signs, such as *the* or *for*. Grade 1½ is grade 1 plus a few additional word signs and some contractions, such as *tion* or *ing*. Grade 2 is the standard grade and consists of grade 1½ plus a long list of abbreviations for words; it is a partial shorthand. The commonest words are abbreviated. And this is important. All Braille books published by the Library of Congress are published in this grade. Grade 3 is used by advanced students for taking notes. It is a very highly contracted system being a virtual shorthand. *The whole point of having the four grades is economy in time and money, printing and reading.*

Through all the years, wonderful private institutions for the blind had been established all over the world. And now today the governments of nearly all countries give a certain amount of aid for the distribution

of Braille books to the blind. It is interesting to know that the American Braille library has become superior to all others. Through the Department of the Interior, Office of Education, the United States provides an annual appropriation of \$100,000 for making books for the blind. This fund is vested with the Library of Congress and bids for the printing of the books are made by the five Braille presses in this country.

By an Act of Congress passed in 1904 all books for the blind loaned to readers from libraries and returned by them are sent free of postage through the mails. There are twenty-six of these regional libraries in this country and one in Honolulu which have a department of books for the blind, the largest being in the Library of Congress. Also there is an exchange of Braille books from England and the continent, on which there is a very slight charge for postage. The Government also provides state teachers for the blind.

But a great deal of work in making more books available is done by the American Red Cross as one of their peace-time activities. They transcribe Braille books by hand. They have many hundreds of Braille sections composed of women and some men who have learned to transcribe Braille. These hand-made books are contributed to libraries for circulation. Also they transcribe text books for students upon request.

Nearly every type of published work except a daily newspaper is now available for the blind. All a blind person has to do is make an application and he can read anything from the *Bible* to *Babbit*.

## Project Progress

⚓ THE Stanford Mothers Club called in the Pacific Gas and Electric Co. lighting engineer during the winter and followed his suggestions by supplying new lights for the Upsilon chapter room where study table is held.

The Jackson, Michigan, group last season afforded children at the Blind School great pleasure by importing stuffed birds from the University of Michigan for study through handling. Because of a budget cut the project could not be repeated.

Montreal alumnae gave a rummage sale during the fall to raise money for aiding the blind. The group is endeavoring to find some angle of preventive work where the funds can be spent to greatest advantage.

Spokane alumnae devoted one regular meeting to work for the blind with a speaker from Social Service, State Department of Social Security. Among individual donations planned, they are furnishing glasses for a needy girl on whom the State performed a cataract operation but for whom they did not provide glasses.

The Dayton, Ohio, group has carried on its Project work through cooperation with the Montgomery County Welfare Association and the Works Progress Administration in Ohio. Housing expenses and supplies are obtained in this district from volunteer subscriptions, as there is no community operating fund.

While the Atlanta, Georgia, association numbers only ten members, it has, during the year, raised \$30.00 through a hose raffle and benefit bridge. Of this fund, \$20.00 was used as an initial payment to provide postage for mailing out a talking machine to a very poor blind person. The group also hopes to find a blind boy or girl to "adopt" giving their efforts a more personal flavor.

#### **Columbus Alumnae Donate Fund**

Columbus, Ohio, instead of giving the usual Christmas party this year, met at a home and donated \$1.00 apiece to relief for the blind in Franklin County. This money was spent for boxes which they helped fill and deliver. They have also been assisting children at the State School for the Blind by giving programs at the school as well as taking the older girls shopping and they are planning to make up a theatre party for a good musical movie. They are also planning to aid the destitute blind of the County who are really needy cases.

The Minneapolis and St. Paul group in the fall assisted as saleswomen at a sale of Victor products made by the blind of Minneapolis. They have been organizing and sponsoring financially an Institute to coop-

erate with the Social Workers of the community to aid in recognizing early symptoms of blindness and working out plans to aid the program committee at the State Social Worker's conference in May at a luncheon devoted to the blind.

Portland has furnished transportation once a month for members of the Oregon Blind School to civic entertainments. They have presented a stage curtain with cyclorama effect to the Oregon Blind Trade School.

#### **Wichita Alumnae Aid Children**

The Wichita, Kansas, group consisting of twenty members, has contributed \$25.00 for carfare and lunch money to three small girls so that they could attend sight saving classes sponsored by the State Society for the Prevention of Blindness. The group had three paid up memberships in the Society entitling them to attend meetings.

The Toronto chapter has charge of deliveries one day a week for the Blind Craft Shop and assists the National Institute for the Blind on their Tag Day. Last season, they collected \$261.87 the chapter covering an entire district with fifty-two taggers, five lieutenants, and a captain. One member loaned her house as headquarters and served coffee and sandwiches.

The San Francisco association, in addition to the Telebinocular machine, have given glasses and glass eyes to needy patients recommended by the Stanford Clinic. They have given transportation to clinic patients and made weekly visits and read to the blind. They have conferred with City and County Hospital authorities, and are considering donating some important equipment for operative work.

In Lincoln, Nebraska, doctors and needy blind persons have been contacted where operative work may restore sight. One hundred fifty dollars has been raised to pay nurses fees in connection with such operations.

Oak Park put up a \$50.00 cash award for the blind person winning a short story contest run by the All Story Magazine. They



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